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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XXXX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
USCINCENT MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO FOR ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT](#)

SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

1. Mideast
2. Syria

Key stories in the media:

All media, except Maariv, led with Wednesday's suicide bombing near Tulkarm, in which IDF officer Uri Binamo and two Palestinians were killed. Three soldiers and seven Palestinians were also wounded in the blast. The media quoted army sources as saying that the suicide bomber was apparently planning to blow himself up at one of many children's events taking place in Tel Aviv during this week's Hanukkah holiday. Leading media cited the IDF's belief that Binamo was Islamic Jihad's 24th victim this year. Israel Radio reported that security forces found and detonated an explosives charge southwest of Hebron.

In its lead story, Maariv reported that former Shin Bet chief Avi Dichter, who is expected to take up a key security portfolio if PM Sharon forms the new government, said in private meetings that a further disengagement would put Israel's security at risk. He was quoted as saying that the Palestinians should not be rewarded for thwarting the Roadmap.

Maariv reported that in recent days, Israel decided to reexamine its firm opposition to holding the PA elections in East Jerusalem. Maariv wrote that one of the explanations for the change in the political echelon's firm stance is that Israel does not want PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas to use its refusal to permit elections in East Jerusalem as an excuse for postponing them. Maariv reported that a senior Israeli political source told the newspaper yesterday: "We are opposed in principle to holding elections in East Jerusalem in which Hamas will participate, but we will examine our position according to developments."

Israel Radio reported that the security forces and the Civil Administration dismantled three illegal, uninhabited settler outposts in the northern West Bank -- Shvut Rachel, Beit El (next to the settlement of Beit El), and Horesh Yaron.

Leading media reported that Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz has decided to set up an investigative team comprised of IDF, police, and Shin Bet personnel, to elucidate the destruction of Palestinian olive groves in the West Bank. The media reported that Mofaz termed the phenomenon a "scandal" and quoted him as saying that it is inconceivable that Israel should accept it.

IDF Chief of Staff Dan Halutz was quoted as saying on Thursday in an interview with IDF Radio that he does not think the IDF will act against the Iranian nuclear program. Halutz was also quoted as saying that because Iran does not yet have a nuclear bomb, it does not

constitute an existential threat to Israel.

IDF Intelligence chief Maj. Gen Aharon Zeevi-Farkash was quoted as saying in a farewell interview with Yediot that Hamas will get 35 percent or even 50 percent of the votes in the Palestinian legislative elections. Zeevi-Farkash was also quoted as saying that Tanzim leader Marwan Barghouti should not be released from jail, because this would strengthen terror and definitely eliminate Abbas. Zeevi-Farkash did not rule out a military operation against Iran's nuclear program.

All media reported that on Thursday, the Labor Party kicked off a new campaign aimed at stopping its slide in recent public opinion polls, which will run under the slogan "Labor - The Time Has Come." The media reported on a Geocartographia survey released by IDF Radio on Thursday that found the Shinui party failing to gain any seats in the next Knesset. Israel Radio reported that Likud Chairman Knesset Member Binyamin Netanyahu is playing down his efforts to ban Moshe Feiglin, the head of the party's Jewish Leadership far-right faction, from presenting his candidacy in the Likud's list for the Knesset.

Ha'aretz reported that the whereabouts of three Britons kidnapped in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday afternoon were still unknown last night, as were the identities of the kidnappers and their demands. The newspaper reported on the huge deployment of Palestinian security forces in Rafah. Israel Radio reported that this morning, "in an embarrassing development for the PA," Palestinian policemen angry over the killing of a fellow police officer stormed the Gaza-Egypt crossing, firing in the air and forcing European monitors to close the border and flee. Maariv reported that at the beginning of the week, East Jerusalem "turned into Ramallah" for a few minutes. The daily wrote: "The displays of anarchy that are so familiar from the Palestinian cities, reached the Dahiat el-Barid neighborhood of East Jerusalem. Dozens of Fatah operatives, some armed, surrounded the building of the Palestinian Central Elections Committee, and lay siege to the site. They sprayed the word "Closed" on the door, and to make the point clear -- fired shots in the air."

Israel Radio reported that in two weeks, a ceremony will be held in Egypt to commemorate the 32nd anniversary of the Chinese Farm Battle during the Yom Kippur War, which took place on October 15-17, 1973. The radio reported that more than 120 Israelis who fought in the battle will participate in the ceremony, including those who were injured, as well as families of the fallen. The station said that recently secret talks took place between senior officials in the security establishment and figures in the Egyptian government about holding the ceremony.

Yediot cited allegations made by members of the Civil Service Commission that Danny Ayalon, Israel's Ambassador to the U.S., attempted to obstruct the investigation against him.

Yediot reported that an El Al plane has been equipped with Flight Guard protection against shoulder-fired missiles, which is made by the Israeli manufacturer Elta. Additional planes will be outfitted with the system in the coming months. The decision to protect the airliners was made three years ago. Maariv and Hatzofe reported that the Saudi newspaper Al-Watan's Cairo correspondent wrote that Egypt's air defense almost downed an Israeli Chieftain plane that had strayed from its scheduled Tel Aviv-Cairo route.

A Yediot/Mina Zemach (Dahaf Institute) poll found that the Labor Party lost the equivalent of 7 Knesset seats in the paper's public opinion polls between November 18 (28 seats) and the end of December (21 seats). Kadima remained stable at 39 Knesset seats, while Likud gained 2 Knesset seats (12 to 14) since last week. Maariv printed the results of a TNS/Teleseker Polling Institute survey, which found that Kadima would garner 40 Knesset seats, the Labor Party 19, and Likud 16.

The Jerusalem Post cited the results of a survey on territorial concessions, security, and the peace process, conducted by Dr. Mina Zemach and commissioned by the Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs' Defensive Borders Project, which indicated that a majority of Israelis believe that the pullout from Gaza was the "right step," but that less than one out of five support a policy of unilateral disengagements. -Almost 80 percent of those surveyed said that they opposed "conceding the Jordan Valley" -- an area viewed as a buffer zone between Israel and Jordan -- as part

of a peace agreement with the Palestinians.
-Similarly, 93 percent of respondents said: "In the context of a peace agreement, Israel must not give the Palestinians the territories that topographically dominate Ben-Gurion Airport."
-In contrast, a slim majority, 53 percent to 47 percent, responded that as part of a peace agreement with the Palestinians, they would be willing to pass the Temple Mount to international control, as long as Israel maintained control of the Western Wall.

1. Mideast:

Summary:

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "The forecast on the matter of the Qassam rockets is not good.... In such a situation, escalation will be inevitable."

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in Ha'aretz: "If [Amir Peretz] succeeds in coming up with a political program for demarcating permanent borders, dismantling settlements, ending the occupation and stopping the bloodshed, he may soar again. Poverty is not going to run away."

Block Quotes:

I. "Escalation Is Inevitable"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (December 30): "The firing of the Katyusha rockets on Kiryat Shmona this week, as the launching of Qassam rockets on Ashkelon and the Negev continues, testifies to a failure of Israeli deterrence.... The forecast on the matter of the Qassam rockets is not good. Sooner or later the Palestinians will improve their range, or will succeed in smuggling long-range Katyusha rockets from Sinai. At that point we will see that Ashdod, too, is within the range of the rockets. There is also the possibility that they will succeed in smuggling similar weapons into the West Bank territories. In such a situation, escalation will be inevitable. The way to deal with it will not be another unilateral withdrawal. In the unilateral move Israel in effect caused the elimination of the disarmament by agreement of the Gaza Strip."

II. "Can Peretz Soar Once More?"

Senior columnist and longtime dove Yoel Marcus wrote in Ha'aretz (December 30): "Amir Peretz is one of the best things that has happened to Israeli politics -- young, Moroccan, sharp of mind and sharp of tongue, and most of all, full of self-confidence. Even those who are not fans of his socio-economic views will find it hard not to admire how passionately he embraces them. Shimon Peres's defeat by someone from outside the tribe has been a great political catalyst and done wonders for [Israel's] political metabolism.... [But] Peretz has erred in not separating himself from his decades as a trade unionist. Not that poverty and the social agenda don't require serious attention, but the main concern of most Israelis today is the need for a political solution that will put an end to the Qassam rockets and terror before the whole region is dragged into all-out war.... Like the conductor of an orchestra, a person who aspires to become a national leader must be familiar with all the instruments. Peretz is too busy in his own narrow niche as a trade union boss. This doesn't mean that he's crash-landed. He still enjoys the intriguing status of a promising leader with extraordinary talent. If he succeeds in coming up with a political program for demarcating permanent borders, dismantling settlements, ending the occupation and stopping the bloodshed, he may soar again. Poverty is not going to run away."

2. Syria:

Summary:

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in the

conservative, independent Jerusalem Post: "The current standstill may indicate that Assad is much more difficult to deal with than any other leader."

Block Quotes:

"From Flames to Embers"

Washington correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in the conservative, independent Jerusalem Post (December 30): "While the international community is putting pressure on Syria to cooperate with the Hariri investigation -- something that could endanger high-ranking officials in the regime -- heating up the Israeli-Lebanese border puts Assad in a bargaining position. He can tell the world, in effect, 'Ease the pressure and I'll restrain Hizbullah. U.S. officials dealing with Syria have acknowledged that 'things have slowed down' where pressure on Syria is concerned. But they are concerned this is only a temporary hiatus.... Some sources in Washington believe Syria will eventually follow suit.... On the other hand, the current standstill may indicate that Assad is much more difficult to deal with than any other leader. Evidence of this lies in the fact that both the U.S. and Europe have exhausted practically all their options with him. Military action is not feasible at the moment; nor are economic and diplomatic sanctions against Syria considered to be effective. The only thing left is isolating the country and hoping Assad really cares.... Such a lack of options where Assad is concerned is another reason for putting Syria on the back burner with the conflict-management approach: putting out fires when they erupt; applying a degree of constant pressure; and hoping for better days."

CRETZ